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ABSTRACT

A study of the current status of Japanese Americans is divided into three sections. Following a brief introduction, a background section provides an overview of Japanese American history, population size and socioeconomic measures, and selected social characteristics. A second section looks in greater depth at socioeconomic status as reported in findings of the United States Commission on Civil Rights and the United States Bureau of the Census. Among the findings are the greater tendency of Japanese Americans than White Americans to have two-income families, lower median incomes, high median education and overrepresentation in fields such as science and engineering. Also considered are characteristic social problems and the question of assimilation. Common conceptions of Japanese Americans as having few social problems and assimilating easily are refuted. In the conclusion, the author states that the positive image of Japanese Americans has certain negative consequences in that it validates the American idea of equal opportunity and obscures important social problems facing Japanese Americans. (LP)

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The Current Status of Japanese Americans

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The Current Status of Japanese Americans

INTRODUCTION

Japanese Americans are among the least understood minority groups in the United States. From the late 1800's through World War II, they were frequently stereotyped as evil, devious, greedy, dishonest, subversive, immoral, inscrutable, and unassimilable. Then, as now, some people also had difficulty distinguishing between Japanese Americans and Japanese in Japan. During the war, this mistaken identity resulted in Japanese Americans being interned in concentration camps; currently, this confusion makes Japanese Americans a target of hostility arising out of economic competition between the United States and Japan. Some people today assume that Japanese Americans are identical to Chinese, Koreans, and other Asian groups in the United States and that all of these groups live in tourist-oriented communities with temples, restaurants, and shops filled with curios, strange works of art, and exotic foods.

More knowledgeable individuals are likely to have a different contemporary image of Japanese Americans, an image of a group which has attained high levels of education, occupation, and income, has few social problems, and is rapidly assimilating. Japanese Americans are apt to be admired because they seem to have achieved all of this on their own through their intelligence, patience, hard work, thrift, and resourcefulness and their emphasis on strong families, community support, and education. This favorable image has received much attention in American

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magazines and newspapers which now characterize Japanese Americans as a "successful model minority." However, this depiction is superficial and vastly oversimplied. And, while this image is positive, it has certain negative consequences which are not readily apparent.

A complete picture of the present situation of Japanese Americans requires a closer examination of their current socioeconomic status, social problems, and assimilation. These areas will be investigated after a background overview of Japanese American history, population size and summary socioeconomic measures, and selected social characteristics.

BACKGROUND

History

The bulk of Japanese immigration to America took place from 1890 until a ban was imposed by the United States in 1924. Although most migrants initially intended to return to Japan after a few years, large numbers later sent for wives and eventually decided to settle in America. Migrants usually came from rural backgrounds and were attracted to America by economic opportunities. They generally went to Hawaii or the Pacific Coast, especially California.

At first, migrants worked as laborers. Subsequently, a high proportion moved on into farm proprietorship, fishing, gardening, or small urban businesses such as hotels, markets, cafes, dry goods shops, and restaurants. Ethnic communities were created by the immigrant generation, the Issei, which included economic,

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social, political, and religious organizations and intricate networks of family, friendship, and business ties. The second generation, or Nisei, were born from 1910 through the 1930's.

Both the Issei and Nisei were the victims of intense discrimination and organized anti-Japanese movements supported by politicians, newspapers, and labor organizations. Japanese Americans fought back with strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, and lawsuits. Anti-Japanese agitation peaked at the beginning of World War II when 110,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were American-born Nisei, were removed from their homes and sent to concentration camps.

After the war, the Nisei used their considerable energies and education to move into good occupations, including professional and technical positions. During the postwar period, the third generation, or Sansei, were born. For more information on Japanese American history and communities, see Kitano (1976) and Wilson and Hosokawa (1980).

Size and Summary Socioeconomic Measures

Japanese Americans are one of several Asian groups in the United States, each of which has distinct cultural characteristics, communities, and historical experiences. Besides the Japanese, the major Asian American groups are the Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Asian Indians; other Pacific and Southeast Asian peoples make up the remainder. Asian American groups are concentrated in Hawaii and along the Pacific Coast, but large numbers are also in the East and Midwest. The 1980 Census counted 812,178 Chinese, 781,894 Filipinos, 716,331

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Japanese, 357,393 Koreans, 245,025 Vietnamese, and 387,223 Asian Indians (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983a).

According to the 1980 Census, Americans of Japanese descent are scattered throughout the United States although they are primarily located in Hawaii (239,734), California (268,814), Washington (27,389), Illinois (18,432), New York (24,754), and several other Western States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983b). Japanese Americans predominately live in metropolitan areas, and large communities can be found in Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, and New York City. Between 1970 and 1980, the Japanese American population grew by 21%, much less than other Asian American groups such as the Chinese (142%), Filipinos (128%), and Koreans (417%) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983a). This growth in the other groups was due largely to the influx of new immigrants. In contrast, relatively few individuals migrated from Japan to the United States. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (1980), immigration from Japan between 1970 and 1980 averaged only about 5,000 persons per year.

Certain summary measures from the 1980 Census (as well as earlier censuses) suggest that Japanese Americans have attained impressive levels of education, occupation, and income. These summary measures are commonly cited by those who view Japanese Americans as a successful model minority. In 1980, Japanese Americans age 25 and over had a median educational level of 12.9 years compared with 12.5 years for the entire U.S. population. Furthermore, 28% of the employed Japanese Americans age 16 and

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over had professional or managerial occupations and 34% had technical or sales positions compared with 23% and 30% respectively for the U.S. population as a whole. Also, the median family income for Japanese Americans was $27,354 compared with $19,917 for the entire U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983a). While these summary measures reflect important achievements, they do not represent a complete picture of the socioeconomic status of Japanese Americans, as will be discussed below.

Selected Social Characteristics

The 1980 Census provides much useful information on Japanese American families. About the same percentage (84%) of Japanese American families as all U.S. families are husband-wife units, but a higher proportion of the former are extended families. Compared with all U.S. families, Japanese American families have lower fertility rates, are on average about the same size (3.2 persons), and are less apt to have children under age 18 (47% versus 52%) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983a).

Other evidence exists which suggests that Japanese Americans are assimilating. This evidence is frequently noted by those who see Japanese Americans as a successful model minority. For instance, Japanese Americans no longer experience the extensive discrimination of earlier years. Most Japanese Americans are second, third, or even fourth generation descendents of immigrants who first came to the United States seven or eight decades ago; Japanese Americans therefore have been in America long enough to be well-assimilated. Also, the small numbers of recent immigrants

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from Japan have not revitalized Japanese American communities and culture. Indications of assimilation can be found in the greater Japanese American participation in social, business, civic, political, and religious groups outside Japanese American communities, the increasing numbers of Japanese American friendships with nonJapanese Americans, and the postwar movement of many Japanese Americans into mixed or predominately white residential neighborhoods (Montero, 1980). In addition, the rate of Japanese American intermarriage has reached 60% in several areas including Los Angeles and Hawaii (Kitano et al., 1984), and only 15% of Japanese Americans speak Japanese as their usual language (Lopez, 1982). Although the above evidence points to a degree of assimilation, like the summary socioeconomic measures it does not present a complete picture of the contemporary status of Japanese Americans.

TOWARD A MEANINGFUL PERSPECTIVE

As seen in the previous section, Japanese Americans have made socioeconomic progress and undergone important changes. However, this should not be exaggerated so that the present status of Japanese Americans is viewed in a simplistic fashion. This section will examine additional material on the socioeconomic status, social problems, and assimilation of Japanese Americans to provide a more meaningful perspective on their situation in the United States.

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Socioeconomic Status: Another View

A number of studies have gone beyond the summary measures of Japanese American education, occupation, and income described earlier. The results of these studies are very extensive, and only the most important conclusions will be examined here. This discussion will rely primarily on reports by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1978, 1979, 1980) and the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1983a).

The high median family income of Japanese Americans does not necessarily indicate economic success. Japanese American families are more likely than white families to have more than one income-earner. Often this additional earner is a woman; Japanese American females have a higher rate of labor force participation than white women. Japanese Americans also work more than whites; the former have lower unemployment rates. Japanese Americans are concentrated in urban areas, particularly in California and Hawaii, where wages and salaries (and living costs) are higher. In these areas, Japanese Americans usually have lower median incomes than whites. In addition, Japanese Americans earn less than whites when taking into account education, occupation, age, amount of time worked, and State of residence. One study has shown that Japanese American males and females with the same characteristics as white males and females earn only 88% and 58% of the amount earned by white males and females respectively.

The percentages of Japanese Americans in professional and technical occupations are significant. However, Japanese Americans are underrepresented in many sectors of the American

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economy. They are overrepresented in scientific and engineering fields and underrepresented in such areas as the mass media, entertainment, the creative arts, politics, manufacturing, skilled crafts, wholesale trade, and construction. Also, Japanese Americans tend to be overqualified for their jobs in terms of education and experience; in other words, they are frequently underemployed. One aspect of this is that even in professional and technical occupations, Japanese Americans are predominately in lower or mid-level positions and rarely in top managerial or executive posts. The preceding occupational patterns may reflect discrimination in hiring and promotion. Finally, fewer Japanese Americans own businesses than in years past, and most of these are small retail trade or service enterprises that are outside the mainstream of American business.

The high median level of education for Japanese Americans is somewhat misleading because education contributes less to income and occupation for Japanese Americans than whites. In conclusion, it should be noted that summary measures of education, income, and occupation mask the diversity of the Japanese American population. Summary measures make it easy to overlook the 10% of Japanese Americans age 25 and over with less than a high school education in 1980, the 7% in poverty or the 19% with annual incomes of less than $10,000, and the 32% in clerical or service jobs.

Social Problems

In some respects, the social problems of Japanese Americans today are less severe than those of their early history. Nevertheless, the continuing existence of social problems

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indicates that Japanese Americans are not necessarily a successful model minority. Japanese Americans face problems in areas like health, mental health, housing, employment, education, the mass media, and social services for the elderly, recent immigrants, youth, and the Japanese wives of U.S. servicemen. One general issue related to many problem areas is discrimination. Discrimination is often subtle and difficult to measure, but it persists, for example, in the exclusion policies of private social clubs, the reluctance of some employers to hire or promote Japanese Americans, the omission of Japanese American history and contributions from school textbooks except in cursory or inaccurate treatments, the media stereotyping of Japanese Americans, and the neglect of Japanese American needs in social service and economic assistance programs and policies. Some discrimination manifests itself in verbal or physical hostility or in stereotyping and discourteous behavior during social interactions. Particular acts of discrimination may be directed only against Japanese Americans or exhibited toward all Asian Americans and even all minority groups.

Information on social problems is available from numerous sources including the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1979) and Endo et al. (1980). Since it is not possible to cover this subject in detail here, brief comments will be made about three problem areas: the elderly, mental health, and media stereotyping.

About 7% of the Japanese American population is age 65 or over, and this proportion is expected to rise dramatically over

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the next two decades. The elderly, especially Issei, frequently have housing, transportation, health, nutrition, and recreation needs. In many cases, these needs are met by family members. However, the elderly often have few other resources. A large number are poor; in fact, Japanese American elderly have, on average, lower social security incomes than white American elderly. Furthermore, most social agencies do not provide accessible and culturally-relevant services (Ishizuka, 1978).

Like other Asian Americans, Japanese Americans experience mental health problems ranging from minor feelings of depression, stress, or alienation to serious disorders. These could be caused by life changes and crises, cultural conflicts, or discrimination. In general, the incidence of problems may be associated with socioeconomic status, degree of assimilation, and area of residence. The elderly, recent immigrants, the poor, and the Japanese wives of U.S. servicemen are high-risk groups. The rates for major problems are hard to determine as mental health facilities are underutilized. These facilities are frequently not designed to offer culturally-appropriate services for Japanese Americans or other Asian American groups (Sue and Morishima, 1982).

All Asian American groups, including Japanese Americans, are the victims of stereotypes. Stereotypes are prominent in movies and on television, although they similarly can be found in books, magazines, newspapers, cartoons, and comic books. Asian Americans are commonly caricatured as individuals with slanted eyes, buck teeth, and yellow skin who have difficulty speaking English.

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Often they are depicted as sneaky, cunning, corrupt, and cruel characters who inhabit crowded, mysterious communities filled with crime, drugs, and violence. Asian American women are repeatedly portrayed as docile, submissive, exotic, and sexy. Even as positive characters, Asian Americans are typically misrepresented as quiet, humble, passive, uncomplaining, and dependent. Stereotypes are actually only one facet of problems with the media. In most cities, television news and documentary coverage of Asian American groups is minimal. And few Asian Americans have successful careers in the television or movie industries, particularly as reporters, actors, and high-level executives (Wong, 1978; Iiyama and Kitano, 1982).

One final observation. In the last few years, physical violence against Asian Americans, including Japanese Americans, has increased to the point where it is being investigated by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. For Japanese Americans, one aspect of this violence has to do with American economic relations with Japan. The United States imports large quantities of manufactured goods such as automobiles from Japan. Many people blame these imports for unemployment and other problems in American industries. Because some individuals have difficulty distinguishing between Japanese in Japan and Japanese Americans, much hostility is directed at the latter.

Assimilation: Another View

While Japanese Americans appear to be assimilating as pointed out above, several studies show that they maintain significant features of their ethnicity. The main results of this research

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will be overviewed here. This review will be based largely on work by Johnson and Johnson (1975), Johnson (1977), Conner 1978), Kendis (1979), Masuda et al. (1971), and Endo (1974, 1985).

Japanese Americans, even Sansei, continue to adhere to values and norms that have their roots in traditional Japanese culture, for instance obligation, discipline, flexibility, and perserverance. These values and norms get expressed in distinctive behaviors. For example, there is a characteristic style of interaction that occurs among Japanese Americans which has elements like emotional control, nonaggressiveness, sensitivity to the feelings of others, use of indirect methods to deal with problems, reciprocity, and the structuring situations to leave everyone a way out if disagreements arise. Within families, distinctive behaviors emphasize elements such as solidarity, mutual dependence, and obligations. Japanese Americans also continue to maintain a strong sense of ethnic identification and pride. Even the children of intermarriages between Japanese Americans and white Americans often develop an identity as Japanese Americans.

Though Japanese Americans, especially Nisei and Sansei, have strong friendship ties with nonJapanese Americans, most have close Japanese American friends and desire a mix of friends. Similarly, Japanese Americans participate in nonJapanese American organizations but many are active in predominately Japanese American associations. A large proportion of Japanese Americans have a preference for residential neighborhoods with both whites and Japanese Americans. Most Japanese Americans maintain networks

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of social ties with other Japanese American kin, friends, and coworkers. In some areas with no residential concentrations of Japanese Americans, these networks help Japanese Americans sustain their own groups and activities.

Since the late 1960's, there has been a significant revival of interest by Japanese Americans in themselves. This revival has been stimulated by the social activism of blacks and other minority groups, and it has two related features. One is a renewed sense of Japanese American identity. The other feature is a greater amount of community involvement. Community involvement has taken several forms. For some, it means working with existing Japanese American organizations and activities. For others, involvement is the development of commercial and cultural centers like Little Tokyo in Los Angeles. For many Japanese Americans, involvement means the establishment of new programs and the use of protest strategies to address social problems and discrimination. This social activism frequently includes other Asian American groups who have similar concerns and it has come to be identified as part of a broad Asian American movement.

The activities associated with the Asian American movement are very diverse. Efforts have been directed toward creating Asian American studies programs at colleges and universities. These programs offer classes and conduct research on the history and communities of Asian American groups. Attention also has been given to the development of community-based services including health clinics, legal services, mental health centers, bookstores, newspapers, media collectives, education programs, civil rights

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groups, and specific services for youth, the elderly, women, and recent immigrants. In many of these fields, service-providers, administrators, and researchers have joined to obtain government grants, hold conferences, and create regional or national organizations. In addition, creative artists such as writers have formed networks and promoted their work as contributions to new cultural patterns.

The Asian American movement has been instrumental in stimulating Asian American professional associations in fields like psychology and business, greater interest by Asian Americans in electoral politics, and more political protest and advocacy by Asian American groups in general. Two examples of the latter are efforts by Asian Amerian groups to deal with increasing levels of anti-Asian violence and by Japanese Americans to obtain government compensation for their World War II internment.

CONCLUSION

A close examination of the socioeconomic status, social problems, and assimilation of Japanese Americans makes it clear that the image of this group as a successful model minority---one which has high levels of education, occupation, and income, has few social problems, and is rapidly assimilating---is superficial and overdrawn. And even though this image is positive, Japanese Americans are concerned about its inaccuracy because this image has certain negative consequences. The perceived progress of Japanese Americans is used by some people to validate the American ideology of equal opportunity and to defend America's treatment of

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all of its minority groups. Also, the perceived assimilation of Japanese Americans is used by some individuals to suggest that minority groups must become like whites in order to be successful. In other words, assimilation is used to justify the superiority of white American culture and society.

There is another negative aspect to the image of Japanese Americans as a successful model minority. To the extent that it is accepted, even by Japanese Americans themselves, it obscures important social problems that require immediate attention and hampers efforts to ameliorate them. Unfortunately, the image of Japanese American success has made it more difficult for Japanese Americans to obtained needed assistance, for instance from government grants, programs, and services designed for minority groups.

Two obvious but important general conclusions can be drawn from an investigation of the current situation of Japanese Americans. First, the process of assimilation is extremely complex. Much research is being done on Asian American groups to reconceptualize this process or on alternative perspectives (Kagiwada, 1982/38; Hurh and Kim, 1984; Cheng and Bonacich, 1984). The experience of Japanese Americans indicates that more attention should be given to forces that promote the persistence of ethnicity.

A second general conclusion is that the idea of minority group "success" needs to be reexamined. Measures of education, occupation, and income alone provide a very narrow view. For Japanese Americans, success goes well beyond the attainment of a

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particular standard of living. Success is measured in terms of full equality, complete acceptance by others, participation in all important facets of American society, and the freedom to maintain distinct ethnic patterns. By these criteria, there is still much that remains to be accomplished.

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